



2005 EDUCATION UPDATE

18th LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT

Dear Friends,

Since I became your state representative, I've made a point of regularly visiting public school districts in our area. Why? It's partly because schools have such important roles in the lives of our children and in our communities. But it's also because no other taxpayer-supported state service comes close to K-12 education in terms of spending and workforce – in the next two years, 42 percent of the state's general fund (\$10.9 billion of the \$26 billion budget) is going toward running our public schools. That's an enormous investment. As your state representative, and as a leader on the House Finance Committee, which debates tax policy, I want to know how your investment is performing.

Equally important are the policy issues facing our schools. And, since not all legislators can be on the Education Committee, the understanding I gain from talking with teachers, administrators and students during my school visits helps me represent you more effectively when bills concerning education come before the House of Representatives.

This report answers some general questions about how taxpayers fund K-12 education, and how we assess student learning and school performance – including an important change taking effect this year. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have other questions about these or other school-related issues.

Sincerely,

Rep. Ed Orcutt

Students residing in the 18th District are educated in 14 school districts. Since the new school year began these districts have agreed to meet with me (and most of the visits have already taken place):

Hockinson
Ridgefield
Kalama
La Center
Green Mountain
Kelso
Castle Rock
Camas
Battle Ground
Washougal
Woodland
Toutle

State Representative **Ed Orcutt**

Serving the 18th District,
including portions of Cowlitz
and Clark counties

Kalama office (through 2005):

Phone: (360) 673-4978

Fax: (360) 673-4979

Hours: 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. M-F

262 N 1st St., Suite 3

P.O. Box 1820

Kalama, WA 98625

Olympia office (2006 session):

415 John L. O'Brien Building

P.O. Box 40600

Olympia, WA. 98504-0600

(360) 786-7812

Orcutt.Ed@leg.wa.gov

Committees:

- Finance
(*Ranking Republican Member*)
- Natural Resources,
Ecology & Parks

Internet page:

<http://hrc.leg.wa.gov/members/orcutt.htm>

Legislative information on the Internet:

www.leg.wa.gov

State government on the Internet:

www.access.wa.gov



Q&A: School funding and taxes

Is funding education the state's number-one responsibility?

Article IX, Section 1 of the state Constitution states: "It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste, or sex."

How are public schools funded?

Most of the money spent by public school districts on classroom instruction, teacher salaries, maintenance, utilities, transportation and learning materials is allocated by the Legislature from the state's operating budget (which also pays for social services, health services, state prisons and other state services). The general fund is the largest portion of the state operating budget. It is funded primarily by sales and use taxes, business and occupation taxes and property taxes (which are dedicated to schools). A different budget, the capital budget, adds to the money you pay locally (through bonds) for school construction and remodeling. School districts also spend money collected locally through tax levies and bonds approved by voters.

Why does it take a "supermajority" to pass a school levy or bond issue?

The maintenance and operation (M&O) levies and bond issues put before voters by school districts are taxes levied on owners of private property. Article VII, Section 2 of our state Constitution is clear: any jurisdiction that wants to impose a property tax in excess of the constitutional limit of \$10 per \$1,000 assessed valuation may do so only by a 60 percent vote of the people – what's known as a "supermajority." Schools are treated no differently than any other taxing district (like a fire district) that wants to exceed the constitutional property tax limit (that's why they are called "excess" levies).

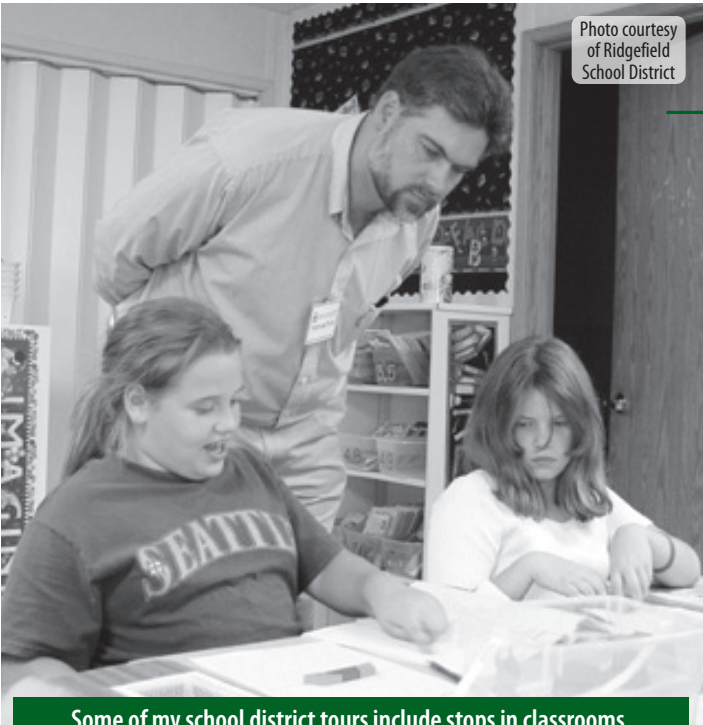


Photo courtesy
of Ridgefield
School District

Some of my school district tours include stops in classrooms, which is how I had the pleasure of visiting Mrs. Cummings' fourth-grade class at South Ridge Elementary in Ridgefield.

What about the education initiatives for class sizes and teacher pay? (continued from front)

Voters in 2000 overwhelmingly passed I-728, to reduce the number of students per classroom, and I-732, to give teachers an annual salary increase. A few years later, requests for overall spending exceeded available revenue by more than \$2 billion. So Democrat and Republican legislators agreed to adjust the funding levels set by I-728 and I-732, allowing passage of a balanced state budget without the need to raise general-fund taxes.

I supported that 2003-05 budget, which raised salaries for teachers in their first seven years of service (in response to concerns that low pay was forcing young teachers to leave the profession). The same budget allocated nearly \$400 million toward reducing class sizes.

When we wrote our current (2005-07) budget, we expected to have 7 percent more revenue than the previous budget. That additional revenue should have been used to fund I-728 and I-732 first, instead of last by relying on tax increases. The party that controls the Legislature opted to fund I-728 and I-732 with higher cigarette and liquor taxes and a new "death" tax. I opposed these tax increases because schools should have been funded first!

A new tax for education? A separate effort was made this year to fund school employee pay raises by allowing countywide property tax levies, on top of school district property tax levies. If the 75-cent per \$1,000 assessed value tax increase authorized under House Bill 1484 were approved by voters individual district bonds or levies could be jeopardized. After voters said

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"NO" to a sales tax increase by rejecting I-884, I'm sure they won't want to see a property tax increase either. It didn't become law, but the issue may come back in 2006.

Q&A: Student assessment

What is the WASL and why do we have it?

Washington's Education Reform Act of 1993 led to the establishment of *Essential Academic Learning Requirements* (EALRs). They describe what all students should know and be able to do in eight content areas – reading, writing, communications, mathematics, science, social studies, the arts, and health and fitness.

The Washington Assessment of Student Learning – the WASL – is one of the tools educators use to measure the progress of students in grades 4, 7 and 10 toward meeting the EALRs.

WASL results are a way to measure school performance. School districts and schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress toward statewide proficiency goals in two consecutive years, according to their WASL results, will be considered "in need of improvement." They will be required to take corrective actions to get back on course.

Do you have to pass the WASL to graduate high school?

This year's 10th-graders, the class of 2008, are the first who must pass the reading, writing and math sections of the WASL as a condition of receiving a certificate of achievement at graduation (starting in 2010, the science section must also be passed). Schools have known this for years, but now that the WASL is officially tied to a diploma, I'm hearing more concern about the requirement.

The Legislature is responding to concerns from parents and schools about the WASL. Last year we made a big change in the law to give students up to four opportunities for retakes, as well as alternative means, to meet the WASL state standards. Students who take the WASL in March 2006 will have their first chance to retake all or part of the test in August 2006.

This year the Legislature provided \$25 million in new funding for the Learning Assistance Program, which will focus on helping struggling high school kids meet the new graduation requirements. Also, we passed legislation directing the Superintendent of Public Instruction to develop and test a career and technical alternative to the high school WASL.

All this is designed to give students every opportunity to pass the WASL.

Want more information on the WASL? Visit <http://www.k12.wa.us>

P.O. Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504-0600

Ed Orcutt
State Representative

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